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Would John Dewey “Tweet” in the Classroom?

By Andrea Gough

All across the wired world, the use of technology in the classroom varies widely, in terms of its frequency, context, and effectiveness. Some teachers utilize ipads, computers, or other mobile devices with enthusiasm and success, while others are mostly chagrined at the inappropriate use of texting or social media during class time. Regardless of the individual's attitude towards this ubiquitous phenomenon, one thing is clear: "an education that fails to account for the use of social media tools prepares students well for the past, but not for their future" (*Mobile and Social Technologies* 2011).

In fact, the U.S. Department of Education, in their 2010 National Educational Technology Plan, set a 2015 deadline for schools to transform their educational environment into one that embraces and utilizes technology in a manner consistent with these basic guiding principles:

- Education should prepare students to be active, constructive participants in a global society.
- Technology-enhanced instruction has the capacity to engage students deeply in their work, connect them with countless resources, and allow them to collaborate across time and space.
- Schools should provide a student-centered, personalized, and customized experience for all students—a fundamental tenet of the *Breaking Ranks* school improvement framework.
- Schools should advocate and model values that are essential in a civil and democratic society.
- Schools should offer meaningful roles in decision making to students to promote student learning and an atmosphere of participation, responsibility, and ownership.

Public schools are working to meet these goals, but Ring Mountain's educational philosophy already includes the above principles because we have drawn upon the constructivist educational principles of John Dewey. A recommendation from the National Council for the Social Studies (2010) underscores this further, saying that "the social aspect of learning by collaboration and an individual's need to explore and experiment are best directed through pedagogies based on constructivist theory." Accordingly, in 5th through 8th grade History classes I have been incorporating the use of technology in a meaningful way. 5th and 6th graders have experienced ancient Egypt virtually, using interactive online activities to experience the practice of mummification and the process of building Khufu's pyramid. With the 7th and 8th graders, I have been more daring: we created a Tumblr site that reflects our study of the Byzantine empire and Western Europe during the Middle Ages. We will continue building upon the site as we move through the Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Scientific Revolution period.

How does this site promote their learning? First, I have noted student engagement to be higher, as they are seeking out related photos, resources, videos, and quotes to share online. Students use the site as a forum to post additional questions, or to further explore an idea that wasn't thoroughly addressed during class discussion. Additionally, the use of Tumblr as a vehicle for collaboration and discussion has drawn some of the quieter students into a more active role. On our class Tumblr site you can also explore embedded timelines each class created. As we moved toward end of our Middle Ages unit,

students worked together to build interactive, annotated timelines – using Timeglider's web-based software – which helped them to frame the expansive period of study into a visual schema. I've never found timeline creation to be so engaging or successful with students until using this program, which is a testament to what an excellent tool technology can be in the History classroom.

So, the question remains: Would John Dewey have tweeted in the classroom? A believer in "the audacity of imagination", his approach to education rejected the idea that schools should focus on passive learning – where the teacher presents information to students that should be memorized and then repeated back. His constructivist approach argued for a method of "directed living", where students would participate in discussions and activities that resembled the real world, and where their knowledge could be demonstrated in a collaborative and creative manner. What better represents the "real world" for most adolescent learners than social media? While I cannot say for certain, it's likely Dewey *would* have encouraged the use of Tumblr, exactly as our 7th and 8th graders are using it: to engage in meaningful learning activities where they must make choices, express themselves in a variety of ways, and interact with a community of learners.

To visit our class Tumblr site, click here: <http://gough-history.tumblr.com/>

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